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Vision That Ushers in Humanity

Reveries, Images, and Potentialities in a Fijian Old People's Home

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Introduction

In Amazonia, according to Viveiros de Castro (1998), all animate beings share the same kind of soul, while their bodies are different. Based on this contrast, every being regards itself as human and the rest of the beings as non-human. Accordingly, human beings exist by dint of “seeing” through the eyes of their own bodies—in other words, by means of vision “as a kind of traffic between animate beings” (Strathern 1999: 252). Stimulated by this argument, M. Strathern, rather than viewing the archetype of perspectival traffic in Melanesia to be the difference between “humans”, “animals”, and “souls”, characterizes it as the exchange of perspective between the donor and recipient in ritual exchange (1999, 2005). Each participant reveals the various relationships that compose oneself by seeing oneself from the perspective of another person and so achieves (de)composition as a person.

Using these notions I present a Strathern-style Melanesian ontology concerning “humans”. In Melanesia, the subjectivity and independence that should be accorded to “humans” entirely collapses. Human existence itself is attenuated on two points: first, that one’s own acts and presence are elicited from the point of view of another; and second, that this becomes possible due to the agency of gifts. In fact, as far as Melanesians are concerned, the pertinent divide is

not between human and non-human, but what kind of person (on the way to becoming) is involved—for example: donor or recipient; male-side or female-side; father’s son or son of mother’s siblings.

The patterns of human existence presented by Viveiros de Castro and Strathern are bound up with the particular circumstances of their perspectives. When examining 20th century philosophy, it soon becomes apparent that ontological consideration of humanity is also reconsideration of vision. This essay considers what it is to be human, by focusing on some specific Melanesians and paying attention to their vision: it studies about 20 male ethnic Fijians—referred to hereafter as Fijians as opposed to Indo-Fijians and others with Fijian nationality—who live in a special facility where they are excluded from generalized gift exchange. Having scanty connections to persons and things, they spend their unfortunate days drawing on support from the God of the Bible and focusing on the afterlife. By establishing strict distinctions between God and nature and animals, they contrast themselves with these things and work to get closer to God by virtue of their own will. These people, who are better characterized as “humans” than as “persons”, have such a restricted view of current social reality that their vision centers on recollections and imagination related to those memories. These images recompose their thoughts, prompting potentialities to be considered as potentialities and religious belief to be actualized. This study will discuss the uncertainty with which gift exchange is tinged and the problem of its original grounds, and will remind us of analogous circumstances in the world of commodity exchange.

Non Fijian-like Fijians

My survey was conducted at the Suva Old People’s Home (provisional name), which an important Indo-Fijian at an NGO critically called “a dumping place”; of which a Fijian head nurse declared, “Fijian’s shouldn’t live like this”; and which made a local friend of more than a quarter of a century wonder if I was joking about doing research there.¹ Since 2007, rather than Indo-Fijians, the majority of inhabitants of housed in this facility, which somehow manages to house around 50 sick and handicapped people on its meager budget from the Ministry of Health and supplementary contributions from international organizations and NGOs, have tended to be ethnic Fijians. Here, elderly persons (*na qase*) in their late 50s to 90s, mixed in with young and middle-aged mentally handicapped and mentally disordered persons; live out their final days in lines of beds quartered in former

¹ For a more detailed description of the home, see Kasuga (2009).

barrack rooms, on plots of land allocated by gender. Most of the old people, apart from a few bedridden by frailty, have been immobilized by cerebral infarction, rheumatism, diabetes, and other illness. Traditionally, these people should have been looked after by their families or some relative and—particularly for the men—they should have sat in the seat of honor at ritual gift exchanges and enjoyed various kinds of talk while drinking kava. If their condition worsened to the point where they could no longer take part in rituals, they would have soon died, either in hospital or at home under the eyes of everyone.

A man brought in by his wife with just a single shabby suitcase spoke, with a vacant expression, on the evening of his arrival:

I told my son. You decide. If you want to put me in an old people's home, that's fine. Put me in [*Lewa ga oiko. Lomamu kauti au e na vale ni malumalumu, io kauti au*].

There was also a man who burst into tears soon after arriving.

God said, 'They hate you. You must go into the old people's home.' That's why I came. I don't understand why. They hate me. Why, eh? How miserable it is to change one's *vanua* [*kena rawawa. veisau na vanua*].

Vanua refers both to the land and group to which one belongs, and to its unique way of living. Fijians become so-and-so of such-and-such a *vanua* in relation to other *vanua* through gift exchange, and thus become full-fledged Fijians. The man who cried when he first entered the home still believed that his family and relatives would frequently visit the home, as they had promised, and that they would always talk to him about the *vanua*, and that he would recall it fondly. He had not yet found out that the frequency of family visits would decline, that he would gradually lose familiarity with the *vanua*, and that eventually all that would remain would be this new place, its people, and the life of the facility. One day a resident who could still walk invited me to go to the town by bus. When, from the window of the bus, the resident saw a *vanua* member and addressed by the kinship term, "Grandfather!", the man he was addressing ignored the greeting, continuing to walk with his back to us, refusing to turn round. Perhaps he was embarrassed by having a close relation with who had been put into the home, and ashamed at having given his tacit consent to this placement.

Fijian residents of the home, including the staff, are aware of one another's *vanua* and acknowledge the special abilities that are accorded to people of the *vanua*. As will be illustrated later, however, the relationships of the *vanua* must be constantly reconstructed by gift exchange. During this process, Fijians—in the visually rich context of the entourage surrounding the chief, the gifts on display,

the special clothing and dances—become devices that perceive and acknowledge themselves in the exchange of “perspectives” with various others who cannot be separated from themselves, such as the groups to which counterparts belong, the people who cooperate in gift-giving, and members of one’s own group with their differing levels of contribution within the group. In the facility, residents are deprived of such opportunities. Moreover, unlike Westerners, who take their own existence as a starting point, they cannot see evidence of their social existence or of their own identities.

After arrival, although Fijian men are generally taciturn and have no culture of sociable conversation, new residents generally make an effort to accustom themselves to the life of the home by frequently conversing with the staff and fellow residents. Gradually, however, they get used to the endless hunger, the arrogance of the staff and their indifference to the dying, and the infrequency of family visits. Usually, after a few months to half a year, most become silent and spend their days mechanically following the fixed daily schedule. While waiting for meals they may occasionally exchange a few words, but mostly, sat in dilapidated wheelchairs or on rustic benches, they spend their time transfixed by boredom.

If one compares this to the circumstances of their former *vanua*, the deactivation of their thought and emotion seems a natural consequence that requires no particular discussion. Shut off from the daily life of the *vanua* and gift exchange with other *vanua*, the circuits that formerly allowed them to control and objectify their perceptions, thought, and emotions as a part of themselves have been cut, they have lost the means for reaffirming who they are. Cast adrift with no familiar landmarks in sight, the residents lose the ability to feel, think, and act, and are unable to orient themselves to come to terms with the fact of being placed in the special and hitherto unexperienced environment of the home.

The Vision of Memory, the Generation of Images

Even so, as people, they are not devoid of thought or sensibility. After observing long-term residents daily listening to Bible readings for hours and offering up prayers over and over again, it is obvious that they do have some kind of internal life. After a simple meal or supper, a resident will often sit or lie on his bed with an absent-minded expression. If asked directly, “What were you thinking about? (*A cava nanuma oiko?*)”, he will not answer straightforwardly. If the conversation turns to memories of happier times, however, there may well be a smile or a chuckle in the response, as with, “The sea when the sun goes down is a mirror! It grows dark as you watch”. This was said by a resident who grew up on an isolated

island in the south west of Fiji and was fond of recalling the days he was taken by his father to a copra plantation on an uninhabited island, staying there till his hair grew long. He was still a child when his father died and he did not go to high school, instead he started working in the tourist town of Nadi. Time and time again, he told me how he acquired bad habits there, indulging in whisky and women.

Another resident, from the main island, would talk about wooing his wife, who predeceased him, and describe the way things were in the 1960s in nightclubs in the capital Suva, and the relationships of groups of young men and women, as if the events were happening here and now: “If she’d lived, this wouldn’t have happened”.

One man, raised in Suva, who grew to old age without marrying, said in English, as if his favorite corner of the town were before his eyes:

The river bank heading from MH [Maurice Hedstrom] to the city center. I would always go and sit there for hours. Whites, Indians, Chinese went back and forth wearing all sorts of clothes. Of course there were Fijians too, and my cousins [*tavale*] would play tricks on me every time they passed.²

In short, lacking the skills to devise ways of dealing with a way of life they had never imagined, before they know it, residents often find themselves conjuring up vague images of a reality that differs from the one in front of their eyes. They recall a past that is no longer like that, and even sometimes imagine a reality that could have been otherwise. According to H. Arendt, memory and remembrance are “the most frequent and also the most basic thinking experience” (1978: 85); and, by an odd coincidence, memory and remembrance are expressed in Fijian using the same word, *nanuma*. These men, who are no longer occupied in patterns of thought centered on exchanging perspectives in gift exchange, activate their thinking through memory, which is another kind of vision.

This pattern of thought has two essential characteristics. The first is that the proper function of the vision of memory is always to be accompanied by some kind of movement, to take on a vividness that makes it seem as if it exists in that place, and to be perceived as more like the actual thing than the distinction between existence and appearance. The vision of memory creates ‘images’.³ Second, the objects of memory are discontinuous and fragmentary, have little coherency and offer no obvious unified wholeness. In other words, images are latent, becoming apparent in a form marked by severance and gaps. Images and

² *Tavale* denotes one’s mother’s brothers’ sons and daughters with whom a joking relationship is normal.

³ The term ‘image’ in this sense is derived from Bergson (1993).

cutting and gaps are decisively important factors in considering how the thought of the residents will be developed from here.

To sum up, the Fijian residents of the home, isolated from circumstances that continually reconstruct familiar patterns of thought, recall memories at a level one might, in a Fijian context, call “individual” and become immersed in reveries. This repeated pattern of behavior can be regarded as a mode of thought in which some image comes to mind, plays itself out and is replaced by another, possibly unrelated, image.

And this pattern is superposed on the features, centering around gift exchange, of Melanesia that Strathern portrayed. Referring to Wagner’s essay describing the burial rites of the Barok, in which trees are felled and erected, she emphasizes the point that rites create images: in rites, images are formed not as some sort of metaphor but as literal acts. However much as anthropologists may want to interpret the meaning of images, during creation, one image merely includes another: it is difficult to uncover the grounds for it. She asserts that if one seeks a Melanesian metaphor, it may be found in the transposition of one image for another, moreover, occurring in a pattern of growth, reversal, and cutting (Strathern 2004: 112–3).

Growth and reversal are commonly mentioned in various discussions of rites; ‘cutting’, however, on which she places the greatest emphasis, is the distinctive feature of Strathern’s portrait of Melanesia, where it is presented as an ‘as if’ found object or ‘artifact’. In Melanesia ‘a person’ is a node in relationships with other people and things. It seems paradoxical, but to create relationships it is necessary to be cut off from people.

Relations are created in the separation of persons from one another [...] As social persons, they need to be separated, indeed severed, before an exchange can take place” (111).

By severing and producing images, gift-giving rites replicate the constructive principle of persons and contribute to the formation of the circuits of the perception, thought, and feelings of the participants. While the content of the images, the style of the severing, and the condition of the circuits that are formed differ from those of the residents; however, the mode of clearing a new path for thought is the same.

It seems that residents sometimes recall memories of several of the numerous ceremonial exchanges they experienced in the past. The gift-giving that they recall is of no use in deciding current thought, perception or action. Among other memories of the past, all it does is create fragmentary images, which are replaced by other images with gaps between them. What I would like to pay

particular attention to here is the fact that a unique generation and severance of images is repeated in the facility, which covers gift exchanges experienced in the past. The gift exchange does not raise doubts in the minds of the residents about whether or not one is a Fijian nor does it deactivate their thought or feelings, as it did shortly after the residents' arrival in the home when they were cut off from it. As with their reveries in their wheelchairs and beds, it stimulates their feelings and thought in the form of fragmentary images. This is taken into the memory=thought that the residents have unwittingly acquired since entering the home, recomposes their past anew and, before they know what is happening, plays no small part in dealing with their, to them, unprecedented current circumstances.

Partial Connections as the Patterns of Thought

Very occasionally, residents of the facility—particularly long-time residents—who can no longer stand the conditions, sotto voce mutter their dissatisfaction, or with reference to particular incidents, discuss in critical terms how things are in Fiji. They pass comments such as “Everyone thinks of nothing but themselves”, “All people want is money”, or “The government is already bankrupt (*sa bankurapu oti na matanitu*) and brims with every kind of evil deed (*i valavala ca*)”. At these times, however, the criticism of other Fijians and the facility is not general: lying in their beds, sitting on their wheelchairs, all they are doing is envisioning specific events happening inside and outside the home and casually making comments. On other occasions, they may take the opposite tack and praise Fijians and express gratitude: for example, when members of staff are kind to them, or when the television news reports a large-scale gift-giving rite.

This phenomenon is apparently quite ordinary; but when one considers it together with the fervid Christian religiosity displayed in various ways by the residents of the home, it becomes clear that new patterns of thought and sensibility develop based on experience of life in the home. After initially being stunned by surroundings so completely cut off from the familiar world outside the facility, residents start afresh by recalling memories of the past and, while gradually weaving in memories of rites and other events, they develop patterns of thought peculiar to their situation. Although the various fragments of images are ephemerally generated and no obvious completeness or coherency is apparent, rather than characterizing the flow as a totally disconnected sequence, it is more fruitful to think in terms of partial connection.

Partial connection is a concept put forward in defiance of the general forms of comparison presupposed by conventional anthropology.⁴ How reasonable is the commonly accepted idea of extracting common and different points from a point of view one level up and then connecting together the objects of this extraction? For example, when comparing the patterns of thought of the residents: it is possible to view that pattern as an enormous unit that includes their lives before they entered the home; on the other hand, it is also possible to view it as just a part of their lives following their entry into the home. In other words, deciding where to fix the point of view for comparison of the patterns of thought is itself difficult.

To deal with this kind of problem, applying the notion of partial connection allows the criteria to arise from the thing under consideration, in a sense, the thing compares the thing itself. Things take themselves as objects and scale themselves. The thing itself uncovers the differences within itself and links to other examples while making reference to that self. The outstanding characteristics of partial connection are the lack-of-distinction of the object and the scale and the linking of that lack-of-distinction to the outside world.

Wrenched from familiar social life, new residents are at something of a loss after their separation from their taken-for-granted daily life as Fijians. Eventually, they come to re-anchor their lives by recalling memories and expanding the scope of their recollections. As a result, they once again become able to evaluate Fijian behavior both inside and outside the home. Having lost the standards and objects that guided their past thoughts, they reach a point of establishing new links to the world inside and outside the facility, when new objects and scales of thought manifested themselves. Moreover, the distinction between the objects and scales of thought is by no means clear; it is entirely conceivable that the familiar images they recall in the home begin to operate afresh both as objects and scales of thought. The pattern of thought of the residents definitely exists as a partial connection.

Partial connection was a concept proposed by Strathern to help explain Melanesian gift exchange. Essentially, the earlier mentioned cutting is related to how each person is created out of the same substance: in other words, cutting refers to the generation of concrete differences in the exchange process. Meanwhile, in each image which has internalized this differentiation there dwells the function of the scale (of difference). As Strathern points out, come what may, cutting produces “remainders”. Because images cannot make contents and scale

⁴ The interpretation of Holbraad and Pedersen (2009) on this issue is insightful.

perfectly coincide, on different occasions it becomes difficult to smoothly link them to other images—of current exchange, past exchange or gift-giving.

In terms of Melanesian cultural imagination, this constant remaindering works to reproduce a grounding sociality of which present relations are only instances, or fractions, and present performances only particulate moments (118–9).

Thus Strathern explains how it is impossible for gift-giving rites to finally and perfectly form each participant as a node in appropriate relationships by means of performance or in terms of the type and quantity of things presented; each rite reiterates its grounding in sociality. Specifically, remainders encourage subsequent performance of rites that, in turn, involve and produce unconvincing relationships, dissatisfied individuals and sociality that is difficult to sustain; in effect, the rites must be eternally repeated. Partial connection reproduces and generates discrepancies and continues forever.

While Strathern's argument can be directly applied to Fijian gift exchange, when focusing on the patterns of thought of the residents of the home, who have been excluded from gift-giving rites, to develop the gift-giving argument by introducing the idea of eternal non-determinacy, it is useful to apply two opposed concepts, "the potential" and "the actual".⁵

Gifts and Potentiality

Fijian gift exchange is always carried out in the name of the Christian god. As natural-born Christians, they regard their gift-giving rites as native traditions dating from before the arrival of the missionaries. In ritual protocol, the chief of the other side's *vanua* is praised along with the Christian god and supplication is made for the prosperity of the *vanua*. Through the perspectives of various others,

⁵ When considering Strathern's argument, it is certainly not unusual to refer to the opposing concepts of "the potential" and "the actual" (Pottage 2001, Holbraad & Pedersen 2009, Jensen & Rodje 2010). She herself proposes the same kind of theme in the conclusion of *Partial Connections* and in one of the chapters of *Reproducing the Future and Property, Substance, and Effect*. Even so, she does not reach the point of genuinely including them in her argument. My reasons for using this contrast come entirely from thinking about my own field observations. First of all, the contrast between potentiality and reality becomes necessary when discussing *mana* and the next world. Second, when considering the memory and remembrance of the residents, Bergson's *Matter and Memory* is a valuable source. However, much has also been learned from Deleuze's *CINÉMA2* (2006), which developed this argument. As far as Bergson is concerned, actualization of virtualities is divided from the virtual via differences; by contrast, reference to actualized *mana* is limited to a vague concept that emphasizes the unknowability of potentiality. Further, "the potential" as used in the current essay is used in place of the philosophical term "virtual", which has its origins in French.

the participants understand the visually rich gift-giving process, and pass judgment on the gifts as a whole and on their own shares. Why does it have to be like this? Is this how reality should be as far as others are concerned? The scene that emerges produces various images; however, within each image itself and among the numerous external images, it produces one inconsistency after another. This situation can be described as an image that should have been able to be different from the materialized image of the rite—in other words, as the estrangement of the image that appeared and the virtual image. This entails one of the most troublesome issues in any discussion of Fijian gift exchange: what is the content of the virtual? Does the content have any breadth? What guarantees are there of valid judgments as to the achievement of proper manifestations of virtuality—that is to say its actualization? The plain and simple answer, “It is God’s decision”, just makes the situation even more complicated.

As many researchers on Fiji have already argued, there is a deeply rooted propensity to link the power of the Christian god Jehovah with that of the gods of the land and the ancestral gods. This is symbolized by the placement at the axis of gift exchange of the chief, who is said to be the manifestation of the god of the *vanua*. Although ultimately only Jehovah can decide if there are discrepancies in the images that are generated between groups and within groups, even while relying on the special power of the gods of the land and of their ancestors, participants in the rites often confirm with one another their opinions of rightness and wrongness of the gifts. In this case, along with the divine protections and blessings they receive from God in their hearts, they confront the other party with the virtual power that their own group conceals. Behind the solidarity for which gift exchange is celebrated, there is caution and competitiveness; to borrow Toren’s terms of contrast, they search one another for a delicate equilibrium point with the equal relationship of “facing each other” and the lord-and-vassal relationship of “facing the chiefs” as the two extremes (Toren 1988). These days, when the kind of force that was formerly used is banned, proving which party has received more of the blessings of Christian god is becoming ever more undecidable.

This undecidability is often handled by the concept of *mana*, which can be described as the manifestation of god’s power. As an adjective, *mana* can be translated as “effective” and is used for denoting situations in which something is actualized. On the other hand, the something that is actualized is the unbelievable bond between images that overturn rules of experience—for example, as with, “the rough sea” and “the man walking there”.⁶

⁶ This aspect of *mana* is illuminated by Viveiros de Castro (2003:1-2).

It is a connection that is difficult to imagine from preexisting fragments and gaps: actualizing the virtual, it causes images to be born in forms that are completely incompatible with the real world.

As long as one perceives proof of the work of God in creation that exceeds human intelligence, it will only be possible for God and the special creatures that God chooses to know what is virtual and what will be manifested as reality from it. The Fijians who apply themselves to gift exchange must accept the non-determinacy of the evaluation of rites. Even so, relying on the gods of the *vanua*, they have a certain confidence; furthermore, considering gift-giving as ultimately an act in praise of Jehovah, they can maintain their pride as blessed Fijians. Although they cannot completely eradicate uncertainties inherent in this extreme non-determinacy, by means of gift exchange, they can live their lives as Christians, continuing to confirm both themselves and others as specific people in specific clans of a specific *vanua*.

By comparison, the residents of the facility are in an overwhelmingly unstable situation. Even if they form an opinion using partial connections that they have constructed in the home in their patterns of thought, new images that they had not predicted are generated somewhere and urge a reevaluation. For example, what should they make of it when a gentle, devout believer develops uremia and dies in the facility, writhing in agony without receiving medical attention? In conventionally proper circumstances, close relatives would assemble and perform treatments and interpretations while referring to the past and present of the *vanua*. A friendly resident said, “I cannot understand it. Only God decides these things”. The residents are always prepared to accept the mysterious will of God and a virtual something that may be actualized in any way and at any time; bereft of choice, all they can do is resign themselves to facing the glory of God alone.

The Actualization of Potentiality

Although the residents may have individual differences in their thoughts about God, it is possible to detect several common features. Mostly these concern how what is “human” is related to “God”. As far as Fijians are concerned, humans (*tamata*) exist in the world as “soul (*yalona*)” and “body (*yagona*)”; after death, the “body” is buried in the earth and the “soul” alone climbs to Heaven, where God is. Opinion is divided as to whether animals and insects have souls, but only humans are endowed with “soul” that should be called “God’s soul”. The souls of

humans obtain “new life” in the presence of God; there, everything is real, and neither lies nor intrigues nor secrets exist.

While residents display fervent interest in life in the next world, as do other elderly people outside the home, they do so in a clearly different way. Possibly due to their less dense attachment to this world, the residents do not emphasize lies, intrigues or secrets. One never hears stories from the residents about the way things, such as one’s family, *vanua* or Fijians in general, should be: they tend not to use phrases such as “Really it should be ..., but currently it’s...” On the contrary, residents tend to talk much more about the unknowability of the next world, where there are no lies, where everything is true. Occasionally, the next world actualizes a part of itself and amazes the people of this world, but its true potential remains unknown to the very end. This world is an imperfect actualized state of the truth; it is impossible to glimpse a manifestation of the whole truth. I frequently heard residents say, “I don’t understand anything except what’s written in the Bible”. The specific countenance and voice of God; the number, form and place of the souls, whether or not they have names, the continuity of identity... all will be revealed in the next world.

Fijians outside the home also think that the *raison d’être* of humans in this world is to be blessed by God. Indeed one of the motivations of gift exchange is to attract divine favor; however, it is normal to have one’s interest in fame and riches in this world snatched away with the correlation between this world and the next left vague. While a man may be proud that success promises blessing, success might actually be due to witchcraft. Even if it is not, success attracts the risk of falling prey to the jealousy of a witch. In short, it is necessary to pay close attention to the state of this world. On the other hand, the residents feel closer familiarity with the next world, and they expect to experience it soon: “When I go to bed, I often think I may pass on in pain during the night, without anyone noticing. But I offer up prayers and am off to sleep all at once”.

The body dies, becomes nothing but soul in the presence of God. Anticipation of this tension and joy to which everyone must submit often makes the residents aware of the universality of the “human”. This is a consciousness of the fact that, transcending all categories of tribes, *vanua* and Fijians, as “God’s souls”, humans are on the same path. Conversation and mutual assistance involving Indo-Fijians is commonplace, especially in the male ward; and cross-ethnic care for residents with mental deficits or dementia is readily observable. Some Australians regularly make charitable visits to the facility, and large bags of underwear are sent from America. No matter what your position in this world may be or what large scale donations one may make, in the end, one leaves it all

behind and heads, as one's unique "soul (*yaloqu*)", for the presence of God. That is what it is to be human.

Awareness of what it is to be human leads one to consider the proper way through which souls should be in the next world. Fijians basically assure their sociality by means of gift exchange and they link themselves to the next world by praising Jehovah in the exchange. As we have already noted, however, the correlation between success in exchange and blessings in the next world is vague, and it is impossible to take the wealth one has gained in this world into the next world. Because the absolute continuity of time, which forms the premise of exchange, collapses, it is unreasonable to think that exchange also exists in the next world or that sociality there is created on that basis. In the next world it would not be strange for the past, the present, and the future, together with birth, growth, and aging all to coexist but in different orders. Transcending the rules of experience in this world, all potentialities may be actualized.

The residents of the home, who are excluded from gift exchange, rather talk of the next world as a place where, set free from the continuity of time and the opposition among souls, "Our souls are together", and "Being together (*tiko vata*)" resonates more as a directly and transparently formed gathering than as mediated coexistence as in the case of exchange. This may sound easy, but it is difficult to imagine in the ordinary life of Fijians because their actions are regulated by rank, avoidance, and joking relationships that depend on age, gender, and kinship. If one were to search for something resembling a direct, transparent gathering it might be found in the facility, which is, as far as Fijians are concerned, an exceptional context. It is a far from pleasant place where titles, one's *vanua* of birth, and the fact that one is Fijian have almost lost their meaning, where beds are lined up in narrow spaces with little space for scant possessions, and where hunger, bad odors, and pain are matters of course. In effect an environment that closely approximates the Fijian notion of utopia has been formed in the place that is most cut off from the humanity and sociality of Fijians.

A Meeting between Potentiality and Actuality

I would like to offer a summary of the standard circumstances of Fijian humanity and sociality. Humanity and sociality are continually generated in a process in which the reconstruction of things, persons, and land is repeated by means of gift exchange that is conducted with an awareness of the eyes of God. While being human and being social are attended by an attachment to this world, ultimately, all gift exchanges are preparation and procedures for sending individual souls to the

next world. In this way, humanity and sociality continue to be generated in order to assure a better state for souls in the next world. Here it is necessary to draw attention to one of the riddles of belief in an afterlife. Apart from vague hints written in the Bible, it is impossible to express in concrete terms what the next world is like. In what way could one imagine a scene in which, transcending every rule of experience in this world, all potentialities are actualized? To the extent that they pour so much energy into the performance of gift exchange itself, speculation about the unknowable next world is not a high priority for most Fijians. The residents of the facility, however, in circumstances sequestered from humanity and sociality, fervently keep their thoughts on the next world and prepare responses after carefully considering how to think about an object that cannot be known.

When eliciting their thoughts on life, death, and the next world, I often heard the words “compassion (*loloma*)” and “belief (*vakabauta*)”. “Compassion” may also be translated as “love” or “sympathy”. While I would not go so far as to attribute the emphasis on compassion to the missionaries of the four sects who visit once a week, the residents do indubitably pay close attention to what the missionaries say. These men, who answer questions about the life in the home with glum expressions and responses such as “It’s fine. There’s food and somewhere to sleep”, generally imagine the compassion of God. It is not just food, clothing, and shelter that make it possible to think of compassion in concrete terms. The greatest symbols of compassion towards humans is Christ, the son whom God sent for the good of mankind, and the Bible, which conveys the teachings of God. Christ and the Bible do not only have concreteness, they each include stories in themselves and form moving images. If this is the case, how should one think about the invisible Jehovah and his unknowable world?

Although the residents do not use the words “exchange (*veisau*)” or “mutual love (*veilomani*)”, they do seem to try to exchange “compassion” with God. Christ and the Bible, which symbolize the compassion of God, are the things that they most “love (*loloma*)” and “hold dear (*maroroya*)”. God observes humans supplicating salvation through these things and grants his blessings. And, as it is written in the Bible, he awards still more compassion when they take pity on their neighbors. When one responds to God’s compassion with one’s own compassion, one brings oneself closer to God. A female resident told me, with rapture in her eyes, that God is at her side and watches over her. Nevertheless, invisibility and unknowability do not vanish because of this coming closer together. Rather, the absolute differences with God and the incommensurability of the next world increase the tension in the residents to the extent that the exchange of compassion

becomes more intense. Sitting on beds or in wheelchairs, residents pray according to personal schedules or when the fancy takes them, and with such force that it is difficult for those around them to approach.

When praying, they close their eyes and address Jehovah saying, “Please be by my side (*Au kerekere niu taura mai*)”, and earnestly insist that their “souls are pure”, and “thoughts are profound”. When offering up prayers, they embody the true meaning of exchange. As in the messages of the articles of tribute to a paramount chief recorded in the 19th Century, they stake their lives on whether or not the gifts will be accepted:

Before we were subject to Mbau [a great chief’s *vanua*], our land was empty, and no cocoa-nuts grew on its shore; but since you have been our Chiefs, the land is full of people, and nuts and food abound [...] Therefore let us live [...] (Williams 1982: 41)

Today Jehovah is regarded as “the chief of chiefs” and “the true chief (*Turaga dina*)”.

I repeatedly asked a resident who frequently and earnestly prayed and with whom I was friendly, what he had been imagining: the blessing that the aged Abraham had received from God; the life that Hezekiah received when death was near; Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead; a district youth meeting held by the Methodist Church where he himself had played the role of Lazarus; the time when he conducted the district choir at a hymn contest held in the cathedral in Suva; and the fact that he had got away with surprisingly light injuries when involved in a bad traffic accident when he was a taxi driver. It seems that different images of Bible stories he had accumulated since he was a small boy appeared intermittently in his mind and were joined fragmentarily with various images of his former self.

“I can’t see God. But I understand (*Au sega ni rai rawa na Kalou. Ia, au sa kila*)”. He added only that it was “too bright (*rui rarama*)”. In Melanesia, the advent of the Christian god is often thought of in connection to the lighting of lights. But, while he entreats God for the exchange of compassion, in contrast to the general gift rites, it is impossible to exchange perspectives. Rather, the asymmetry, the unidirectionality in which God can see him but he cannot see God is confirmed. Paradoxically, however, this only strengthens his belief and his faith that his thoughts are delivered to God. He says that “To believe is to be as if you could already see it (*Vakabauta e dua na ka me vaka ni sa raici oti*).” One cannot see it, but it is the same as if one could: this means that the entire outside of the association of images can be visibly confirmed, thanks to the leaking of a world of obscure light, an unimaginable outside becomes the object of thought just as it is.

These circumstances, which might be described as a meeting between potentiality and actuality, recall the argument developed by Agamben in which he cites Aristotle. In contrast to the conventional notion that potentiality is annulled in actuality he asserts that potentiality can be preserved in actuality, and that this is realized thanks to “the gift of the self to itself and to actuality” (1999: 184). In effect, Fijians become subjects capable of thinking of potentiality as potentiality and believing in it, by elevating compassion, that special gift from God, to the level of a principle under which one composes oneself and fabricates this world.⁷ In fact, compassion (*loloma*) is the virtue that Fijians, who dedicate themselves to gift exchange, pride themselves on as their own particular characteristic, and the word is also used for “present” as a proof of love. Compassion, the very epitome of gift-giving, connects Fijian ritual exchange to God and the next world and, at the same time, produces both the humanity of Fijians and the ultimate grounds for exchange. This gift only fully puts thought and faith to work, however, when fragments and gaps become apparent in the process of successively condensing memories of the past and turning them into images; and from that the too-bright outside is unmistakably enfigured both as a visual and as a virtual image—Deleuze would probably call it crystallization. The guarantee of “being human” is conferred through a type of extreme vision. It is hard to imagine that this kind of definitive experience is born inside a public old people’s home.

‘The Potentiality to Be’/‘The Potentiality Not to Be’

My argument has proceeded with lateral reflection of the observer and the observed as an inherent goal. I wanted to explore the lateral construction of the anthropologist’s analysis and knowledge alongside the observed’s analysis and knowledge, while holding in common circumstances in which subjectivity, autonomy and grounding are difficult, and a fixed point of view has been lost. Having made that confession, I will now try to come to some conclusions.

The residents of the Suva old people’s home display their active love through the passivity of being loved by God and confirm their will to believe; however, they do not place any great emphasis on the autonomy of humans or the

⁷ In Agamben’s argument, Aristotle’s “potentiality (*dynamis*)” is set over against “actuality (*energia*)” and it is possible to interpret them as close to “possibility” and “reality” as in the case of seeds and flowers. However, Agamben emphasizes that “potentiality (*dynamis*)” is at the same time “impotentiality (*adynamia*)”—in other words, “the potentiality to not be”—and links this concept to a pedigree connected to Spinoza, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze (1997: 54). For which reason, one is more fully convinced by the French version, which translates it as “*puissance*”, in other words, the philosophical term, “*virtualité*.”

restoration of dignity. Rather their long-cherished ambitions will only be achieved when the body has vanished, when the soul metamorphoses and when they cease to be a subject, a human or any other actualized state. While they bet all on “the potentiality to be another existence”, in the end they perform the role of supporting the humanity and sociality of Fijians by supplying grounds for gift exchange beyond the facility. The residents’ mutual relationships give birth to “being together”, a particular way of being and of coexistence that is closer to the next world than to the this-worldly sociality of Fijians. At first glance, this coexistence is similar to the circumstances where, in *The Coming Community*, Agamben says, “humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging” (2007: 86); it differs, however, in that it still maintains specific connection. In *The Coming Community* there are no common characteristics, identity, or even bonds that demand recognition; it is even difficult to describe anything as social. This is because Agamben establishes “the potentiality to not-be” as a condition for his community in place of “the potentiality to be”. Interestingly, the two potentialities excite a discussion that acts in concert with the contrast of gift exchange and commodity exchange. This is because, as embodied by Bartleby, the protagonist of Melville’s story, a scrivener who prefers not to write, “the potentiality to not-be” is related to separation from the world of commodity exchange and, at the same time, acts as the original grounds for commodity exchange.

The people I observed, excluded from gift exchange, created a particular coexistence while aiming for “the potentiality to be”. By contrast, when it comes to commodity exchange, withdrawal is not the result of the direct exercise of power by another person, rather it is decided by the person himself, depending on judgments about the circumstances of the commodities—including money—he holds. One of the essential differences between gift exchange and commodity exchange is that the latter enables an individual to decide how far the person and things should be separated, while the former does not. Commodity exchange, where the separation between the person and things proceeds to fabricate a subject as owner and objects as commodities, can be actualized only on the presupposition that ‘the potentiality to not-separate’ coexists. One can even say that the ultimate grounds for commodity exchange is accorded by “the potentiality to not-be”. The market mechanism and the relationship between capital and wage-labor come into being on the presupposition of their potentiality as non-commodities. There are people who do not cede themselves, even though they sell their labor, and goods that are not bought and sold, even though they were manufactured.

However, the same potentiality also leads to withdrawal from the world of commodities. In the current world, people who actualize “the potentiality to not-be” have emerged all over the place: people who stow away the commodities (labor) they have to hand; and further, people who show no interest even in cases where they have nothing to hand but could buy or sell on credit. The kind of sociality such people construct is henceforth likely to be an important topic for study. What is certain is that such people are set to continue to stand at the fork in the road between actualization and potentiality, presupposing death as potentiality, unlike the residents of the home, who think of the world after death as actualized in its virtual state as such. The nature of existence that they manifest through that process is profoundly related to how their vision is formed. Will the point of view be fixed? How will one point of view relate to another? What will “see” what? In what way and how will severance and connection operate? How will outside and inside, gaps and continuation accommodate one another? And, most important of all, what kind of operations will memory and images perform? While strongly regulating the way in which human beings exist, exploration of these issues will probably open up paths to persons, agents and beings; to cyborgs and human-nonhuman assemblages; and, eventually, to superhumans.

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